Collective Action Supporting a Student Childbirth Accommodation Policy at the University of Kansas Medical Center

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BACKGROUND

Many institutions of higher education nationwide have acknowledged that the years spent in graduate and professional degree programs are often the prime childbearing years for students. These schools, now including over 150 universities, have stated policies that provide accommodations to expectant and new parents. The University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) is one of these institutions. The University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) is a public research university located in Kansas City, Kansas. The University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) is a public research university located in Kansas City, Kansas. The University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) is a public research university located in Kansas City, Kansas. The University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) is a public research university located in Kansas City, Kansas.

In order to address this concern, students in collaboration with faculty and administrators have proposed a student-specific childbirth accommodation policy. We believe that KUMC has an opportunity to assert itself as a progressive institution that values family friendly policies for students, faculty and staff by adopting a childbirth accommodation policy. This would also illustrate a commitment by KUMC to diversity and inclusion which would allow our institution to recruit and retain high quality students.

In order to gain more information about policies at other institutions, Kellyann Jones, former president of GSC, researched policies and accommodations guaranteed to students at other Association of American Universities (AAU) institutions, of which the University of Kansas is a member. The majority of AAU institutions in the United States have a childbirth accommodation policy in place for their students. This research underscored the need for a similar policy at KUMC. This background work and the policy were shared with the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, Dr. Michael Werle, and the KU Women in Medicine and Science group, then under the leadership of Dr. Paige Geiger.

WIMS was instrumental in the early stages of this process by providing support and guidance to faculty and students. The Steering Committee of the Faculty Assembly (GSC) was also an early champion of the policy providing advice and support, editing drafts of the policy, and opening doors to other meetings with key administration.

To ensure transparency and to keep students, faculty and administration informed, feedback was sought from key stakeholders on campus and multiple faculty and student groups.

The following individuals and groups were consulted:
- Executive Vice Chancellor
- Deans and Associate Deans of the School of Medicine, School of Nursing, School of Health Professions, and Graduate Studies
- Senior Vice Chancellor of Academic and Student Affairs
- Vice Chancellor of Student Services and Registrar
- Steering Committee of the Faculty Assembly - this group is the governing body for KUMC faculty
- Graduate Council - this group formulates policies for graduate programs at KUMC and is made up of faculty representatives
- Office of the General Counsel
- Medical Student Assembly
- Graduate Student Council
- Student Governing Council - this group is the governing body for all KUMC students

PRECEDENT

The Association of American Universities (AAU) is an organization of sixty two leading public and private research universities in the United States and Canada. The AAU focuses on issues such as research, research policy issues, and graduate and undergraduate education.

The AAU universities in the United States award more than half of all U.S. doctoral degrees and a majority of those in the sciences and engineering. These sixty universities were used as the group for analysis of the different type of childbirth accommodation policies found primarily for graduate students. Greater than 65% of universities that belong to the AAU have childbirth accommodation policies that protect, offer accommodations, and guarantee continued stipend support.

Childbirth Accommodation Policies at Association of American Universities Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of universities</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities without a policy*</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities that protect time but do not guarantee stipend support</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities that protect time and guarantee stipend support</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Universities without a policy include those that have policies on parental leave but do not provide accommodations to students for childbirth.

POLICY

Students are proposing that the University of Kansas Medical Center grant students up to a six-week accommodation period for welcoming a child under the following conditions: the birth of a child, the adoption of a child, or the placement of a child for adoption or foster care. The six-week accommodation period can be granted as a leave, a research leave, an extended leave of absence, and so forth. The policy would also cover students who are not enrolled but are receiving financial support from the University of Kansas Medical Center.

The policy would provide students with the opportunity to continue their education, research, and/or clinical activities during their leave period. Students would be required to submit a formal request for accommodation, including documentation of the child’s birth, adoption, or placement. The policy would also provide for the continuation of financial support during the leave period, subject to the availability of funding.

IMPLEMENTATION

Now that this draft of a policy statement has been prepared by students in collaboration with administrators and General Counsel, the policy is ready to move forward to voting. Votes will have to be held at the level of the Student Governing Council and the Faculty Assembly. Meetings have been scheduled with the Steering Committee of the Faculty Senate and the Student Governing Council to present the final version of the policy. Both governing bodies will have to adjudge the policy, then each school hall be given time to write their own version of the implementation guide so that it can officially be presented to the student body.

CONCLUSIONS

The process of trying to implement a childbirth accommodation policy at the University of Kansas Medical Center has been a highly collaborative process involving students, faculty, and administrators. Since this policy was conceived by students and the steering committee was navigating how to go from envisioning an idea to implementing a policy on a campus wide level. This is where faculty members and groups like WIMS that interact with students regularly, were instrumental in helping in framing and framing a common narrative to write policy statements, how to make presentations and speeches to faculty and student groups, and how to advocate for their fellow students. Historically, KUMC has shown student initiatives tremendous support. Examples include Apsis, a student-run free clinic, and Students in Schools, a mentoring organization for elementary and junior high students. These successful student initiatives have taught the university leadership is to trust and empower students to promote meaningful change in the institution.

Transparency was also very important in implementing this policy especially since it involved a financial component. Administrators at all levels and in multiple disciplines were consulted and given the opportunity to raise concerns and provide feedback on multiple drafts of the policy. Since the process has been ongoing for over a year, it has been extremely important to keep lines of communication open especially as leadership changes have occurred. For example, leadership of both WIMS and the Steering committee of the Faculty Senate have transitioned to newly elected officers and some departments have changed since spring 2012 when this process began, but all parties have been made aware of the policy and have enabled it to continue to move forward.

Overall, the victory for implementation of a childbirth accommodation policy thus far has been that the Office of Graduate Studies has offered WIMS support in continuing current initiatives, and the Office of General Counsel, Student Services and Registrar, and Student Governing Council have been instrumental in making the policy a reality. The policy has offered financial support for continuing student stipends and that the policy has been allowed to move to voting at the Student Governing Council level. Several administration personnel have had the university leadership is to trust and empower students to promote meaningful change in the institution.

Students, faculty, and administrators alike are excited about the policy as it has offered a platform for students to stand up for their rights and gain support for their cause. The policy has been supported by a majority of the faculty and student community, and the support has been both vocal and financial. The policy has also been supported by administrators, who have provided financial support for continuing student stipends and that the policy has been allowed to move to voting at the Student Governing Council level.

Besides academic, research, or clinical accommodations, students who choose to utilize the childbirth accommodation policy will maintain their full-time student status and those who receive stipends will continue to receive their financial support. A cost-sharing partnership between the office of the student’s funding and the Office of Graduate Studies has been proposed.

A guide to implementing the policy has also been written for Graduate Studies with the intention that each school can adopt the implementation guide to their student population. This guide is meant to ensure clear communication between the student, their advisors, and instructors. It also encourages advisors, academic staff, and departmental leaders work with sensitivity and strong communication skills in speaking with advisors, instructors, and academic deans when they are placing a family or expecting a child to devise the best personal and academic plan. In order to maintain the academic freedom of programs, requests for childbirth accommodation can be shortened to less than six weeks or denied with justification due to academic constraints. In these cases, students will have the ability to file an appeal if they feel they are being treated unfairly.

The implementation of this policy will enable KUMC to track data on the number of students who become parents and/or lose eligibility for financial support due to childbirth. The policy will also provide the necessary support to enable students to stay in their chosen career trajectory while being pressure to make changes to accommodate a family.